I remember watching the election results with my great grandmother as President Richard M. Nixon trounced South Dakota Sen. George McGovern in the 1972 election. I felt sorry for the senator, he carried only one state, Massachusetts, not even his home state. Bless his heart. Of course, at 10 I had no idea what was at stake or what motivated anyone to vote aside from the Vietnam War that was the backdrop of my life to that point. In my family there has never been any question about whether I would vote. It is simply what you do, an action as unquestioned in my family as breathing or eating Grandma Rauhauser's pie.

As I've learned about our nation's history, I've come to value that vote even more, and the people who fought for my right to do so. Voting is a privilege that hasn't always been available to all citizens. Who gets to vote and when is largely decided by the states. When the nation was young, most states limited voting to white men who owned property. This was true in North Carolina until 1856, the last state to do away with property requirements.Voting was set in November during the 1800s when most Americans were farmers. This ensured the harvest was secure and beat winter storms that would make travel difficult. As in most of the country, Surry residents were spread across the county which meant people came to polling places in Mount Airy, Dobson, and Elkin on foot or by horse, a journey that might take all day and require an overnight stay.

Tuesday was chosen to allow travel on Monday with voting and travel home the next day which avoided Sunday worship and Wednesday market day. The requirement that it be "the first Tuesday after the first Monday" of the month was set in 1845 to give members of the Electoral College enough time to travel to the capital in time to finalize elections as laid out in law. Today, of course, voting is much less inconvenient, taking only a few minutes for most of us at locations within our neighborhoods or communities..

Surry County has a pretty reliable track record for voter turnout since 2000, according to the county Board of Elections; 66 to 70 percent in presidential years and 40 to 45 percent for the mid-terms like this year. Historically, the county (and state) seems to have been Democratic (called the Democratic Conservative Party at first) much to the concern of the Surry Weekly Visitor newspaper, a Republican-leaning publication in 1872. They warned readers to beware Democrats handing out ballots said to be Republican but with Democratic candidates listed to fool illiterate and partially literate men. The region was still mostly Democratic when they sent both John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson to the White House in 1960 and '64 but they followed the Southern shift to the Republican party in the mid-20th century going for Nixon in '68 and '72. Watergate caused a backstep for Republicans, however, and the county "cleaned house" in 1976 with the election of Democrat Jimmy Carter to the Oval Office and local Democrats such as then-high school social studies teacher Dennis "Bud" Cameron to many local offices.

The Mount Airy News ran a pointed front-page piece of satire on Sept. 16, 1876, meant as exaggeration but true at its core, then and today; "…my dear fellow-citizens, male and female, of every condition, the great day is coming and on that great day I want to see you march up, walk up, run up, roll up, tumble up, and crowd up to the ballot box. Never mind torn flounce, and muddied ruffies, and crumpled crinoline and mashed toes and skinned shins, never mind muddy boots and dirty shirts, never mind the sweet perfume, go forward in the exercise of your glorious rights of suffrage."

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